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Pakistan's Grand Strategy: The Poverty of Imagination

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Abstract

This article is concerned with a significant grand strategic choice that Pakistan faces concerning its relations with China. The relationship between Pakistan and the United States has deteriorated since the US Special Forces found and killed Osama Bin Laden in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad in May 2011. Instead, Pakistan has been recalibrating its grand strategy enabling it to get closer to China. The country has received large Chinese funds to start several infrastructural projects in Pakistan as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. We argue that Pakistan is making a grave strategic mistake. Its partnership with China is unnatural and it will count against its core interests in the future. We suggest that Pakistan should reorient its grand strategy in order to bring it closer to Western democracies. Doing so will ensure greater security, economic development and sovereign independence for Pakistan.

Introduction:

Pakistan has made several major grand strategic mistakes since its creation in 1947, such as its decision to ally with militants to boost its defence (Kapur 2016). The country is in the midst of making another grave mistake, and it is one seldom discussed. This is the high cost of its partnership with China. Due to the poverty in its long-term, strategic planning, Islamabad's conception that the Sino-Pakistani partnership is key to Pakistani security introduces dependence on Beijing, and creates the avenue for Beijing's exploitation and manipulation of it – with the result that Pakistan finds itself less secure and alone in the world. We argue that Pakistan should reverse course. The partnership with China ultimately serves China's ambitions above Pakistan's. Islamabad should extricate itself from its partnership with China, and improve its position by aligning with other, democratic states.

The rise of China has had profound impact on Pakistan's strategic calculations. A more powerful and outwardly amicable China causes a natural reaction in Pakistan to align itself more closely with China in order to balance against India, its long-term adversary. Pakistan's leadership believe that a partnership with China will somehow replace the long-term Pakistani dependence on the U.S. in mediating its relations with India. They also think that this relationship will help improve Pakistan's poor economic situation.

The reinvigoration in relationships between China and Pakistan has enabled China to make the so-called "China Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC) a cornerstone of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the first phase, CPEC will bring an investment of about \$60 billion in Pakistan with the major sums to be spent on the country's ailing infrastructure (Kiani 2018).

On the other hand, Pakistan's relations with the United States have continued to spiral downwards, in particular, since the arrival of the Trump administration in office (Khattak 2018). Washington has long criticised Pakistani sponsorship of terrorist groups in Afghanistan that have made it hard for the U.S. to extricate itself from the Afghan quagmire. The current administration has also decided to cut American aid to the country, which amounted to approximately \$1.3 billion per year. All this has been happening at a time when Washington has refocused its energies toward strengthening the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or 'the Quad') between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. The Quad is a result of these four countries' determination to maintain a 'free and open Indo-Pacific.' It

also highlights the view of these four democracies to remain engaged in the region (Panda 2018).

Why the Sino-Pakistani Partnership is a Mistake?

Pakistan's strategic choice to ally with China is a profound mistake. The alliance is a mismatch in several key respects. Most importantly, Pakistan is emerging from the shadows of authoritarianism and can be classified a hybrid regime at best. Given the population's desire to never revert back to the era of dictatorship ('Army won't take over' 2017), Pakistan's ever-tighter embrace of authoritarian states is a strange and incongruous choice. These states deprive their citizens of freedoms and rights that the Pakistani policy leadership have vowed to nurture at home.

Pakistan should note that China has tended to treat its allies as subordinates instead of partners in shaping its geostrategic ambitions. Indeed, Beijing has not been subservient to any state since the Sino-Soviet split by the late 1950s. China's steadfast allies are Cambodia, Iran, Myanmar, and North Korea—hardly an august group.

By embracing China and distancing itself from the Quad, Pakistan will lose on several fronts with formidable costs in the longer run. An important factor in this regard is Pakistan's economy, which has suffered tremendously in the last decade. The value of the Pakistani rupee has seen a consistent decline over this period and the country's foreign exchange reserves have dwindled accordingly ('Foreign exchange' 2018). The situation has been made worse after the Trump Administration successfully lobbied the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to include Pakistan in the list of the countries with insufficient ability to deal with terrorist financing (Chazan 2018). FATF is an intergovernmental body that devises policies to counter activities related to money laundering. Despite Pakistan's diplomatic efforts, the country was placed on FATF's 'grey list' on 28 June 2018. The decision was made due to Pakistan's inability to tackle money laundering and to prevent terrorism financing (Iqbal 2018). This development will further alienate foreign investors, giving Pakistan little choice but to depend more on Chinese investment. Pakistan has already turned to China to generate further loans to avoid an imminent bankruptcy ('Pakistan seeks' 2018). Interestingly, China decided to not support Pakistan at this critical juncture by voting against Pakistan's placement on the grey list despite promising to do so earlier on. It was reported that Beijing decided to withdraw its support for Pakistan after New Delhi's reassurances of a greater Chinese role in FATF-related activities in the future (Samanta 2018). That episode shows clearly that for China keeping Pakistan on its side is not as big a concern when it comes to reaping significant advantages by joining institutions like FATF. It would be expected for any state to look after its own interest first and it would make sense for China to not lose a good opportunity just to keep Pakistan on its side. That is because Pakistan needs China more than the other way around.

We can also look at another similar incident in which China chose to protect its own interest and reputation instead of siding with Pakistan. For a while, several countries including the United States and India were asking the UN to designate a Pakistan-based individual, Masood Azhar, as a terrorist. Azhar is known to be behind several terrorist attacks in India including the Pulwama attack of February 2019. However, the UN was unable to do so due to China blocking such a move (Zheng 2019). However, given the consensus at the UN in favour of Azhar's designation as terrorist, Beijing soon realised that it was increasingly getting isolated on the matter and the rest of the world was likely to see its stance as irresponsible and unworthy of a great power (Zheng 2019). China dropped its objections and Azhar was designated a terrorist by the UN in May 2019 ('Masood Azhar' 2019). India's intense

lobbying also played a part after the Indian Foreign Secretary visited Beijing in April 2019 to convince the latter. That shows that China would be willing to abandon Pakistan at multilateral forums when it considered the costs of that partnership to be too high.

China's economic assistance to Pakistan has come, however, with very high costs. It has vowed to invest up to \$60 billion in Pakistan as part of the CPEC but most of this investment will be extended in the form of loans - with a high interest. Experts have cautioned countries against borrowing from China as it does not show much desire to adhere to internationally recognised norms of debt sustainability, including UNCTAD's 'sovereign lending principles' (Fontaine and Kliman 2018). These principles state that 'undisciplined, ineffective, abusive or non-cooperative behavior on the part of both creditors and sovereign debtors should be prevented in order to minimize sovereign insolvencies and their negative consequences' (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2012, 4).

Sooner rather than later, Pakistan will find itself unable to service these very costly debts held by China. As it is rapidly moving all its eggs into the Chinese basket, it will quite likely have to enter a 'debt-for-equity swap' with China – something that Sri Lanka recently had to do when it was unable to service its Chinese debts. The Sri Lankan deal handed China control of the strategically important port of Hambantota (and 15,000 acres of surrounding land) for 99 years (Fontaine and Kliman 2018). The current Sri Lankan government is trying to extricate itself from such arrangements put in place by the country's previous administration.

Along with helping Pakistan deal with its imminent economic woes, China is also building a naval base at Jiwani in southwest Pakistan (Gertz 2018). Jiwani is located around 80 kilometres west of the Gwadar port (another venture developed by the Chinese). The town is only 15 miles away from the Iranian border. Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, the Iranian port of Chabahar, developed jointly by Iran, India and Afghanistan, is only a stone's throw away from Jiwani (Rajagoplan 2018). The Jiwani base will enable the Chinese navy to service its fleet in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean region, which is present to provide support to the country's commercial shipping in the region. A military analyst commented that Chinese warships in the area require a wide range of 'maintenance and logistical support services' which the Gwadar port is unable to provide (Chan 2019). The plans also include expanding the Jiwani airport to allow the Chinese military aircrafts to land there. That underscores the need for China to build a naval base in Jiwani plans for which are already well underway (Gertz 2018).

Allowing China a military presence in Pakistan is harmful for the country for several reasons. Pakistan will take a hit to its sovereignty, and Pakistani military and civilian leadership will have little-to-no say in determining how China decides to use that facility. Also, the Chinese military presence on Pakistani soil (which is highly unusual—the only other known case for this is Djibouti) is going to make Pakistan a target in the event of a clash between China and India. The Chinese interest in Pakistan's northwest has already raised eyebrows in New Delhi, which remains hopeful that its Chabahar port in Iran will allow it to enter the regional market in Afghanistan and Central Asia (Borah 2018). India has invested a great deal in that venture and would not like the port to be under any threat. The potential for conflict will grow.

Pakistan's partnership with China also heralds a number of difficulties for Pakistan on the domestic front (Syed 2018). *The Economist* has reported that the arrival of Chinese companies in Pakistan has been accompanied by sale of pork on Pakistani high streets as well as opening of the 'massage parlours' in affluent neighbourhoods which have often been attacked by conservative Pakistanis ('Massive Chinese' 2017). Chinese workers involved in different projects in Pakistan are also increasingly being seen unfavourably by the locals (Shah 2018).

China's investment in Pakistan is also set to make the latter less competitive economically within the world economy (Qadeer 2018). Pakistani government officials have admitted that Western investors are shunning Pakistan because of the impression that 'Chinese firms ... receive "exclusive advantages" and concessions, militating against a level playing field' (Chazan 2018). These impressions are not without foundation. A Pakistani minister noted last year that certain Chinese companies building power stations in Pakistan were able to negotiate favourable terms with the Pakistani government because the funds for building those installations were provided by Beijing (Jorgic 2018). Reuters reported that Pakistanis had little choice in the matter because Beijing 'made such terms a condition of its financing for projects that were part of the CPEC' (Jorgic 2018). Nepal recently faced a similar situation, but in which it interestingly chose to cancel a \$2.5 billion hydroelectric dam project to be funded as part of BRI. It did so because of the fears that the bidding process will be unfair and it may send negative signals to non-Chinese investors (Chazan 2018).

Additionally, China's presence in the Balochistan province of Pakistan is doing little to enhance the prosperity of the Balochi people (Amir 2018; Phullan 2018). Despite CPEC being described as a 'game changer' by Pakistani elite, the locals in Balochistan have been left 'waiting on the sidelines' (Shafqat 2017).

Chinese presence in Balochistan is also bad news for the long-running insurgency there. Islamabad has continuously blamed New Delhi (and Kabul) for meddling in Balochistan and for supporting insurgents there, inflaming the already volatile situation on the ground that has led to the deaths of thousands of Balochis in the last two decades (Shafqat 2017). Indian interference in the province makes sense as it would not like Chinese investment in that part of Pakistan to succeed. India has expressed strong objections to the development of Gwadar port in Balochistan as the road linking it to China passes through the territories disputed between India, Pakistan and China (Shahid 2016). Instead of being the direct beneficiaries of the China-Pakistan partnership, the Balochis of Pakistan are the collateral damage of the rivalry between Pakistan and China on one side and India and Afghanistan on the other (Bansal 2008, 194).

Importantly, concerns have already grown in Pakistan itself regarding its overreliance on China. In November 2017, Pakistan removed the construction of Diamer-Bhasha Dam from the list of CPEC projects because of its worries that the Chinese financial conditions were not 'doable' (Chazan 2018). Pakistanis were particularly concerned about China's condition that it should be allowed to own the facility instead of Pakistan.

Recently, a member of Pakistan's cabinet also expressed concerns over the economic fallout of CPEC. Dawood asserted that 'Chinese companies received tax breaks, many breaks, and have an undue advantage in Pakistan; this is one of the things we're looking at because it's not fair that Pakistani companies should be disadvantaged....I think we should put everything on hold for a year so we can get our act together.' He went on to assert that the 'the previous government did a bad job negotiating with China on CPEC – they didn't do their homework correctly and didn't negotiate correctly, so they gave away a lot' ('Under the guise' 2018; 'Dawood says statements' 2018).

Why Pakistan Should Align with the Quad?

Pakistan should align with the Quad for the following reasons. The Quad is stronger than China in every respect: diplomatically, economically, militarily, and politically as demonstrated by its democratic values (Green and Shearer 2012). An alliance with this stronger coalition permits Pakistan to safeguard its interests. Pakistan is going through a phase of immense economic hardship (Amir 2018). In this scenario, a more welcoming attitude towards Western democracies will open various significant doors for the country (such as receiving an economic bailout from the IMF). It is important to note that Pakistan

does not have many choices when it comes to obtaining help for its economy. Chinese financial institutions cannot help Pakistan in any way to fully compensate for the absence of a new IMF bailout (Small 2015, 97).

Aligning with the Quad will permit Pakistan to improve its relations with the United States: the Quad's key member and historically a stabilizing force in South Asia (Kux 2001). Pakistan's embrace with China will alienate it from the United States even further. In the past, Pakistan has relied heavily on the United States to influence India (Paul 2006). Washington's timely intervention during the Kargil crisis enabled Pakistan to extricate itself from the deadly conflict. Today, it remains dependent on Washington as the only great power with influence in both Islamabad and New Delhi.

Pakistan cannot rely on Beijing's good offices to play the same role as the U.S., simply because China is not in a position to. In the past, it has refused to come to Pakistan's help on a number of occasions including in its different wars with India (Small 2015, 15). More importantly, China has a number of its own key foreign-policy concerns to its east for which it would prefer to not antagonise India further. Lastly, it is unlikely that India would accept Chinese mediation due to its rivalry with China. Only Washington is in a position to mediate between Islamabad and New Delhi.

Instead of serving Pakistan itself, the country's partnership with China paradoxically serves India's interest best. For India, a lonely and isolated Pakistan in tight embrace with China is the best possible option. This relationship makes Pakistan more isolated in the international community. In the event of a clash between India and Pakistan, New Delhi will call upon Washington's assistance as it has done in the past. On the other hand, Pakistan will lose that potential avenue of conflict resolution and path to pressure India. Alignment with China only ensures opposition to Pakistani interests in Washington. That situation is only welcomed in New Delhi, but in Beijing as well. China desires some degree of tension between India and Pakistan as this increases its leverage in Islamabad.

If Pakistan were to reorient its strategy and adopt a more sympathetic attitude towards the Quad and this league of democracies, such multilateral arrangements may be able to play a mediating role between India and Pakistan. Alliances have the potential to serve mediating purposes and their utility lasts well beyond the objectives of balancing and bandwagoning (Walt 1990). Thus, were Pakistan to join the Quad, it would weaken India's leverage against it, as Islamabad would be better supported by the international community. A Pakistan on friendly terms with the world's major democracies mitigates against its isolation in the world. Doing so will open opportunities for Pakistan to get international financial assistance to support its ailing economy. Aligning with the world's foremost democracies will also ease Pakistan's own path towards democratization. Decision-making concerning the matters of national security is very much in the hands of the Pakistani military with the civilians having almost no control over the process. The elected officials may differ with the army on the country's grand strategy but they have almost no way to influence it. A closer relationship with democracies will empower the civilians in the civil-military equation. Though it will be challenging for the military to lose some control on the matter but the military should know that it will have to give given its pronouncements regarding a democratic dispensation in Pakistan ('Pakistan Army apolitical' 2019).

Islamabad should also realise that it is fast losing its leverage in Afghanistan. Washington is seriously negotiating with the Taliban to extricate itself from the Afghan quagmire. With the return of the Taliban to power on the cards, Pakistan will no longer be able to play the U.S. against China. Pakistan can no longer expect that the unrest in Afghanistan will save Pakistan (the country has reaped huge rewards for its support of the Western intervention in Afghanistan). Where Pakistan would continue to need the US, the latter's need for the former will fall even further.

Of course, Pakistan has other possible options to tackle its strategic isolation, but each is grossly inferior. Its relationship with Russia has been warming, and its long-standing relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE provide partial solutions to Pakistan's security situation. However, Islamabad's relations with Moscow are nascent, and are far from a security alliance that would aid Pakistan against India. Indeed, Moscow has traditionally had warm relations with New Delhi. As India is a more valuable country for Russia, it is very unlikely Moscow would provide salient military assistance to Pakistan or would extend deterrence to it, a move certain to alienate India.

Pakistan cannot expect that its traditionally close relationship with the Gulf sheikhdoms, especially Saudi Arabia, will ensure its security. The Gulf sheikhdoms and Saudi Arabia are capable of providing financial assistance to Pakistan as they have for years. They are also capable of serving as channel to Washington. But they are not significant military powers and could not and would not project conventional power to assist Pakistan in a confrontation with India. The Saudis have actively played a role in mediating between different stakeholders within Pakistan at different times. However, Islamabad cannot continue to rely on Riyadh's good offices for several reasons. The main point of concern for Pakistan should be the close U.S.-Saudi relationship: the Trump administration can press Riyadh to adopt a lukewarm attitude towards Islamabad. Saudi Arabia will unlikely ignore the advice from Washington as it has more to lose from doing so compared to what it stands to gain by favouring a closer relationship with a potentially isolated and impoverished country like Pakistan. A closer look at the Saudi stance regarding Pakistan's recent placement on the FATF grey list is quite revealing. The Saudis initially opposed the idea of placing Pakistan on the FATF grey list. However, they retracted their opposition after Washington promised Riyadh full membership of the body if they followed the Americans' lead (Iqbal 2018). Recent fluctuating oil prices, and subsequent Saudi economic insecurity, will also make it make it more difficult for the Saudis to assist Pakistan on the economic front.

Pakistan has a choice of whether it would like to become the North Korea of South Asia, a state heavily dependent on China with few options—or to play its cards better. It is fast appearing as a caged-in nation as its relations with its other neighbours – India, Afghanistan, and Iran – have taken a downward slide. The country would do well to rethink its grand strategy at a fundamental level. It needs to realise that the BRI (and, by extension, a major plank of Chinese foreign policy) needs Pakistani cooperation and collaboration far more than Pakistan needs China. Furthermore, Pakistan is getting far less from China than the benefit China is reaping from its partnership with Pakistan. The advantages to China include access to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf, opening up of Pakistani markets for Chinese products, major infrastructural contracts benefiting Chinese companies and the returns China stands to make on its loans to Pakistan. China would also use the partnership to counterbalance 'the deepening security relationship between India and America' ('Massive Chinese investment' 2017). Most importantly, the relationship offers China the opportunity to encircle India at very little cost to Beijing but at significant risk to Islamabad (Pant 2012).

What Pakistan Should Do: Steps in the Right Direction

A near-term or quick reorientation of its strategy would be unthinkable for Pakistan. Rapid grand strategic changes do happen in international politics, but they are rare (Art 2004). Nonetheless, Pakistan can start by taking a few baby steps, which will place it on a path to greater security and freedom of action, as well as anchoring it in a community of democracies. These steps include the following: first, Islamabad can begin to create a little bit more distance between itself and Beijing by not accepting the latter's every demand. It is true that China has been Pakistan's major arms supplier since 2011 but that can enhance the latter's dependence on the former reducing Pakistan's strategic autonomy (Malik and Ishtiaq 2018). Second, it can also start openly criticizing China's exploitative economic policies and human rights violations, such as its treatment of its Muslim Uighur minority in Xinjiang.

Third, it can also endeavour to send more positive signals to the Quad by beginning to reconsider its alliance with terrorists and declaring its support for Quad's aims and greater cooperation with its members (Akram 2018). Fourth, it can also negotiate better terms for permitting China to reap significant benefits from its relationship with Pakistan. At a minimum, the relationship should entail that Pakistan is an equal and not subordinate member, and Islamabad should be open to requiring the renegotiation of existing contracts. Fifth, Pakistan would be better off to not allow any Chinese military presence on its soil, as Sri Lanka has recently announced (Rajagopalan 2018). Sixth, Pakistan should endeavour to win over the Trump administration, which has shown itself amenable to opening avenues for dialogue.

In a future of multilateral alliances and blocs, Pakistan would be well advised to choose its allies carefully. In the event of becoming a vassal state of China, it will primarily have itself to blame. On the other hand, a more positive attitude towards the Quad will solve a number of Pakistan's economic and strategic problems, and will also strengthen its independence and sovereignty. A closer relationship with Western democracies will build on the close societal links Pakistan enjoys with states in Europe and North America. It is not certain whether the dragon will easily let Pakistan extricate itself from its embrace, but Pakistan has every motivation to escape its grasp before it becomes impossible to do so.

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